

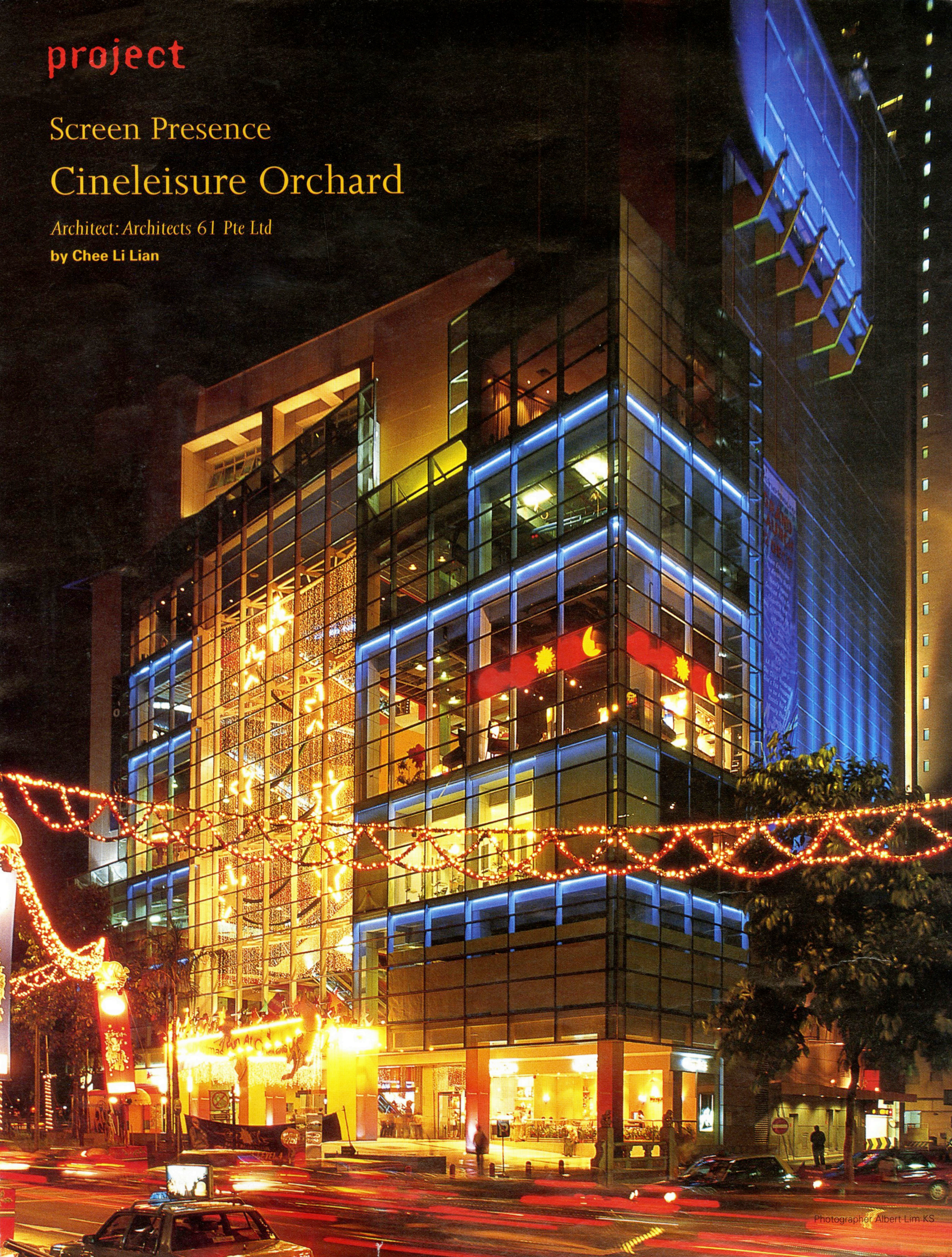
project

Screen Presence

Cineleisure Orchard

Architect: Architects 61 Pte Ltd

by Chee Li Lian



Opening Sequence: Architecture & Cinema

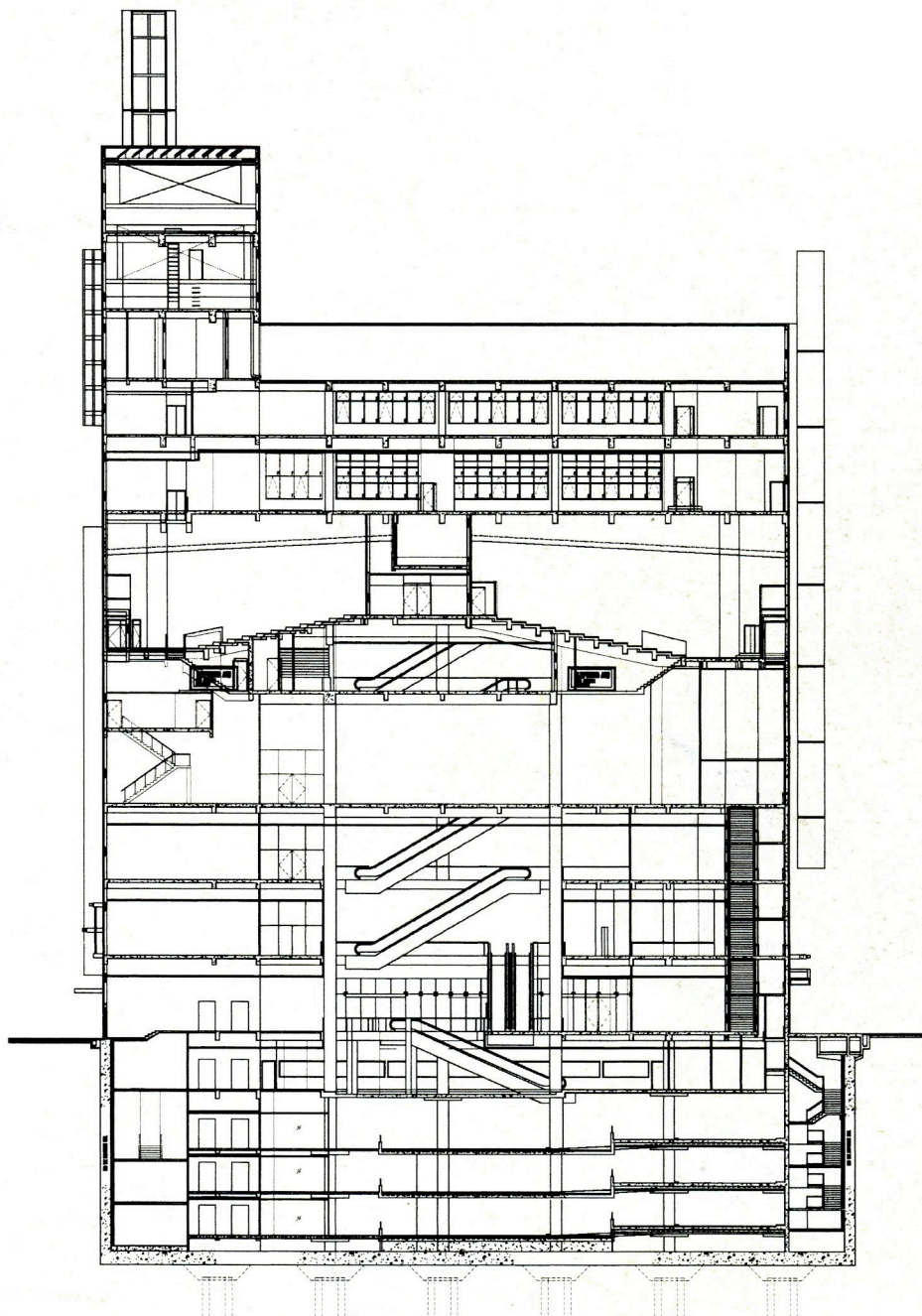
Today

The cinema has a curious presence in our popular culture. Indeed, it is space that attempts to mediate the ephemerality of film with the physicality of place. A wave of interest has once again been vested in this building type with the sudden resurgence of cineplexes, both urban and suburban, around this tiny island state. Yet today, the cinema business has begun to locate itself in a larger and more compelling context, that of “media entertainment”. This new catchword carries the weight of a new type of environment that reads “interactive, transient and global”. More than ever, our once static coordinates of place have now to operate with additional materials from this new palette such as engineered light, amplified sound and diffused movement. In themselves, these have sufficiently captured the popular imagination.

One asks if architecture as the traditional media of experience is in danger of being displaced? This fear is not unfounded. In a sense, what is the balance sought between what is global (media and the cinema) and what is local (the genius loci)? Similar issues appear to have shaped Cineleisure Orchard at Grange Road.

Opening its doors in November 19, the new media-entertainment complex by Architects 61 faces some very tall orders. For one, it is scion of the famous Orchard Cinema. The latter was as much a cultural institution as it was a social and commercial one in this country since raising its curtains in 1965 to a series of firsts: Singapore’s first escalator, bowling alley and the only “supercinerama” screen. It became the popular haunt of more than mere moviegoers, attracting two generations of Singaporeans in its illustrious thirty-year life. For many, this place has been the set on which important chapters of their lives were enacted. For another, the new Cineleisure is pressed to objectify the intangible electronic media phenomenon that prides itself on connecting every point on the globe through the “magic” of optic fibres and soundbites. This mission was explicitly outlined in Cathay’s lofty ambition to build a media-entertainment centre that would take it well into the twenty-first century.

Herein lies the confrontation of two very poignant scenarios, the former calling forth a profound regard for continuity and the latter, requiring drastic intervention. At the seam of memory and amnesia, the architecture negotiates difficult terrain. “We come here to remember



Cross Section

Opposite: Cineleisure Orchard reveals itself provocatively at the junction of Orchard Road and Grange Road



Top: The complex's visual language is a collage of forms that lock into each other. A bright red mast seeks to establish a link with the spirit of the old Orchard Cinema formerly on the site.

Bottom: A huge glass screen offers the outside world a peek into the interior. The cinemagoer becomes part of the show.



and yet to forget". The contemporary yearning to be here and yet to be everywhere is imminent. It is interesting to see how far Cineleisure has managed to address the duality of these issues.

Plot: Architecture From and Through the Looking Glass

The spanking new nine-storey Cineleisure stands at the confluence of Orchard Road, Grange Road and Somerset Road and is home to six cinemas and a host of media-related entertainment and food establishments. As the architects explain, Cathay's brief for the new millennium required facilities that would cater for diversification beyond the boundaries of pure cinemagoing. The brief itself and the very tight site spun the narrative for this scheme.

Revealing itself provocatively from the junction of Orchard Road and Grange Road, the complex's visual language appears to be a collage of forms that lock into each other. A skewed structural frame clad in glass aligns itself to Grange Road, and clings emphatically onto a backdrop of orthogonal solids that continue the grid of Orchard Road. Such a relationship disturbs the static conception of the external form with the skewed entity defiantly asserting the presence of Grange Road as its major entry, violating the Orchard Road monopoly. A bright new red mast in the spirit of Orchard Cinema's Art Deco façade, triumphantly signposts this building to the Orchard Road crowd and a blue panel mounted high beside the post awaits a new video display.

The architects allude this vibrant parade of forms and colours (of which the primaries of red, blue and yellow, pepper the facade) to the roots of playful cinematic devices, the most important one being the screen. To this, the great glazed plane pays its homage. It is undoubtedly the *tour de force* of the building's external form. There is a refreshingly democratic air about it. Somewhat exhibitionist in character, it offers the outside world a peek into the looking glass. "All the world's a stage" as the architects elevate the spectacle of cinemagoing to the level of the show itself.

Architecturally however, the intention to express this element as the great screen is somewhat diluted on two counts. The first is at the corner facing Orchard Road. Here, the glass skin negotiates the bend as a clean wrap-around, confusing its legibility as a pure planar entity. The



architects qualify that it was a calculated move to let this corner read as a “lantern”. The clean glass corner would give future tenants a much-desired exposure to Orchard Road and correspondingly a bonus to the owner in terms of rental rates. Still, there might have been opportunity to consistently allow the screen to trespass the limits of the solid frame on all its edges. Secondly, the screen is deliberately cut at random intervals, resulting in a stepped profile. At points of these cuts, the solid backdrop is brought to the foreground. Amongst them, an aluminium-clad panel of vibrant yellow holds fort. This was initially envisaged as a “light box” onto which laser projections would grace. It is unfortunate that this idea was eventually scrapped and hence, the yellow panel stands lonely, even looking extraneous, being emptied of its possibilities.

Behind the screen, a series of escalators appear to criss-cross the space in random order. It is within this intersection of movement and of display that one finds the most fertile space in Cineleisure. Far from being a neutral circulation zone, it is also a performance space. Here, an all-important kinetic element animates the space:



Top: A skewed structural frame clad in glass aligns itself to Grange Road against a backdrop of solids that continues the grid of Orchard Road.

Bottom: Somerset Road elevation.

the human body. The whole facade glows with a life not perceivable on paper. Some incredible possibilities have cropped up too as a result of this juxtaposition. Each escalator is aligned at a subtly different angle from another thus, generating a series of paths that cross but do not meet. Art (architecture) imitates life as in the case where the man on the street is a stranger to another despite the immense physical proximity that delineates the singular crowd. The composition constructs an “architectural promenade that defies beginnings and endings in the ritual sense developed by Le Corbusier”¹. An apparent chaos challenges the audiences’ perception and the users’ logic making this interstitial space a true product of media-entertainment’s hunger for the unexpected.

On an urban scale, Cineleisure does not engage a dialogue with its surroundings. Given the difficulties of its tight site and the struggle the architects had to attract the flow of pedestrians from Orchard Road, it seems that very little has been done to choreograph the street itinerary. The question asked here is “What feeling does the building

have at street level?" The answer is important since the premises of this new complex hold historical significance for a large proportion of Singapore's population. A café that opens onto the plaza fronting Grange Road is the only window out of which internal activities cross the boundaries of the screen. Even this appears restricted as paying customers of the café sit behind a glass railing, separated from the masses who pass but do not patronise. In this respect, the screen, though transparent is treated as a non-permeable barrier. While the floor pattern of the pavement faithfully traces the dynamic tilt of the glass screen, little else seems to support the continuity of human drama from behind the glazed plane into the street.

Stepping inside through a single volume entry, the space explodes with the busyness of escalators, detailed to reveal their moving parts. The client's agenda was to make a place that could at once entertain and educate thus, influencing Cineleisure's paraphernalia. There is an animatron that greets each visitor with a touch-screen display explaining the building's and Cathay's profiles, a video screen beyond the atria blazing with light and sound and, two life-size mannequins as movie-makers surveying the "actors" beneath them. Examining the atria, one is reminded in many ways of Garnier's Opera House, where different levels, observation points and places for congregation were created.

Yet, beyond the glossy celluloid trimmings and the excitement of the escalators, the interior atria somewhat disappoints. The architects' intention to bring light into the space is commendable and the placement of a surrounding U-shaped mass allows for a unique central space that has one transparent face to the street. Unfortunately, an atria's liveliness depends greatly upon its surrounding activity. Here, one observes the presence of many blank walls, which although painted in the same cheerful primary colours, do not encourage pedestrian traffic around the central void. Also, the lease lines of the shops are kept in strict check, resulting in no casual spillover of activities towards the atria. Such a condition parallels to what is observed at the seam between the building and the street. However, one must realise too that such mute surfaces arise also out of the pragmatic requirements of the programme, such as the video and arcade games space that necessitates blank walls. There is also the fact that it is still early days for this complex. With the smell of paint still fresh coupled with the recent



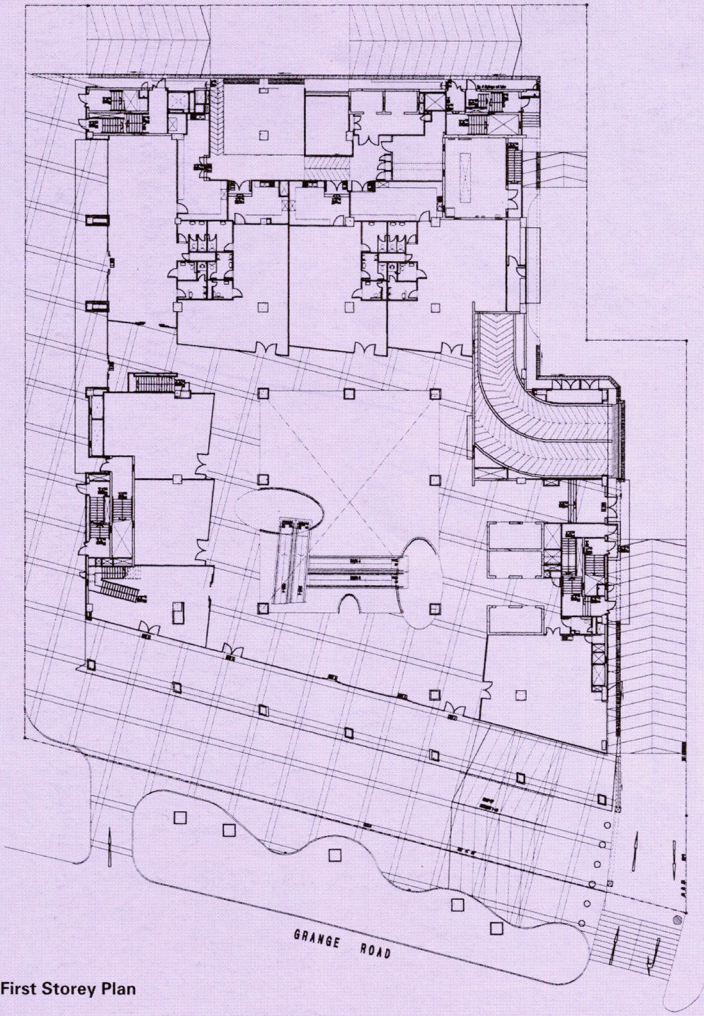
Opposite top: Escalators behind the facade are aligned at subtly different angles. An all important kinetic element is the human body. Some incredible possibilities result from this juxtaposition.

Top and opposite bottom: By contrast the cinema foyer is a surprisingly conventional space.

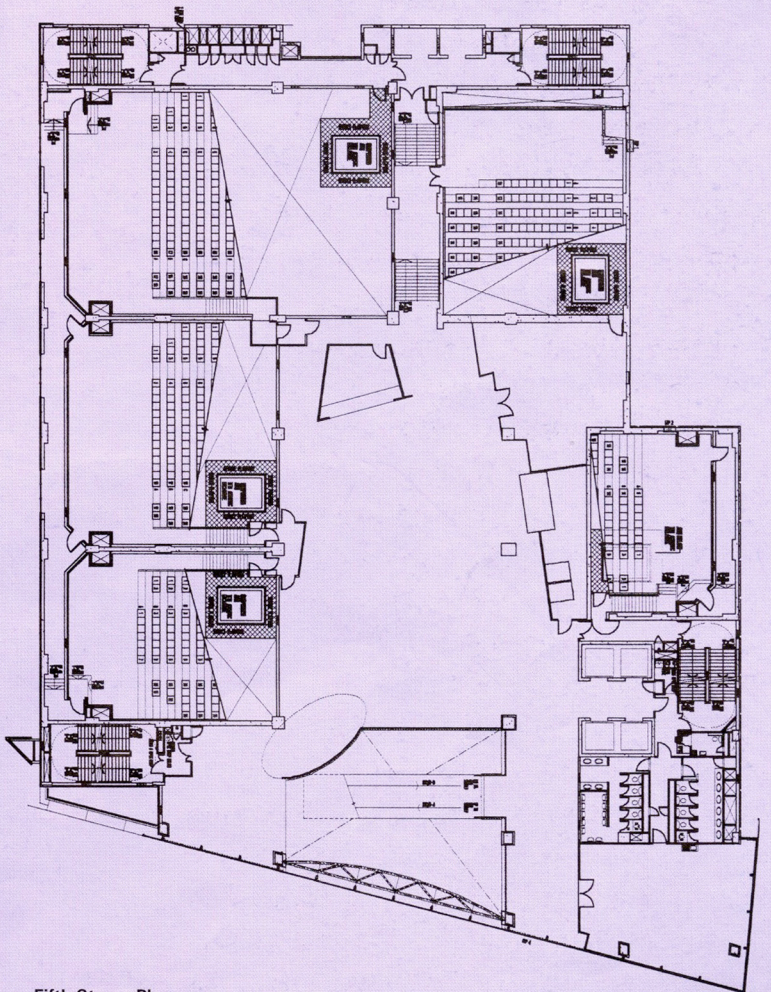
On the fifth storey, the cinema foyer hold ticketing facilities, a concessionaire and a special area to preview movie trailers. During the writer's three visits there, the foyer seemed devoid of activity irrespective of the few who had the privilege of watching the film trailers unblocked. In fact, the success of the foyer as a "people space" for mingling, waiting and milling around is questionable. The homogeneity of the entire space does not signal a hierarchy that distinguishes the variety of activities taking place here (purchasing tickets and drinks, surveying possible movies to watch, waiting for the next show to begin and coming out after a show). Understandably at Cineleisure, the floor area is limited and commercial desire to pack facilities in often result in a compromise of sorts.

Surprisingly, the experience of descending the escalators far surpasses that of ascending them. From this direction, the intentions for the deliberate subtle shifts in the placement of the escalators and the random elliptical balconies that address the atria, are made more obvious, engaging the user in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek.

The passageway that connects the escalators between the second and third storeys is perhaps the jewel in this building's crown. Occupied by Celebrities' Asia, a row of tables and chairs enjoy delicious views of Grange Road from behind the great screen. Trusses bracing the transparent façade were detailed to allow for unobstructed views. A rare respite from the excessive compartmentalisation, the vibrancy of this space owes much to the overflowing boundaries that allow for chance encounters between restaurant-goers and other users of Cineleisure.



First Storey Plan



Fifth Storey Plan



Climax: Architecture for Past, Present and Future

Architecture has the power to relate the past through the present to the future. In this case, the architects have valiantly attempted to capture the playful spirit of the original Orchard Cinema, from reinterpreting elements like the original Art Deco post to what is now the red mast, to according abstract importance to the escalators and the screen which were sensations in their heyday. Yet, Cineleisure is very much a building of its own time. As Diana Agrest succinctly puts, "Design implies the transformation of sense, of memory of the known. It is not only memory, but amnesia"². To repeat the old Orchard would be tantamount to a pale caricature of the original. As such, the recomposition of elements like the escalators, the screen and the mast, is crucial to suggest their new significance to a contemporary audience.

One often feels seduced by histrionic outward gestures. But this is not enough. Works that give a sense of occasion draw their strength from much more subtle moves generated from deep understanding of space, people and context. On this note, the weakness of this place is perhaps its inability to create secondary places within the great space so that individuals can feel reassured and casual social contact is encouraged.

However, the criticisms made on this project have the benefit of distanced retrospection and the writer understands only too well the perils of architectural practice and the uncompromising domain of commercialism, both within which Cineleisure operates. It is therefore refreshing to see a heroic attempt to make an architecture that struggles to meet the demands of "globalism", that quality of anonymity and placelessness epitomised by media-entertainment and yet to root one to a place, the Orchard Cinema of old that once held many memories. This is a good opening sequence into the next millennium.

notes:

- 1 Anthony Vidler, "Refiguring the Place of Architecture", in an introduction to Agrest and Gandelsonas: Works. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), p.15.
- 2 Diana Agrest, "On Practice, 1979", in *ibid.*, p. 292.

Chee Li Lian graduated with a B Arch (Hons) from the School of Architecture at the National University of Singapore in 1997. She was awarded the Gold Medal of the Singapore Institute of Architects. She is currently working with DP Architects Pte Ltd.

Opposite: The promenade behind the transparent facade is a dramatic space with a spectacular view. A place to see and be seen.

Left: The experience of descending the escalators engages the cinemagoer in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek.



Project Data

<i>Client</i>	Cathay Cineleisure International Pte Ltd.
<i>Architect</i>	Architects 61 Pte Ltd
<i>Director-in-charge</i>	Helen Chen
<i>Associate-in-charge</i>	Lim Chow Weng
<i>Designer/Project Architect</i>	Andrew Lian
<i>Architectural Design Team</i>	P'ng Siak Kheng Henry Lee Desmond Chen Kay Ch'ng Lou Zhong Heng
<i>Technical Assistants</i>	Wilfred Tan Tang Weng Yeow Richard Gan Goh Kia Yee
<i>Civil & Structural Engineers</i>	HCE Engineers Partnership
<i>Quantity Surveyor</i>	Davis Langdon & Seah
<i>Interior Designer</i>	Designphase Pte Ltd
<i>Landscape Architect</i>	Tierra Design Pte Ltd
<i>Mechanical & Electrical Engineers</i>	Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner (SE Asia) Pte Ltd
<i>Lighting Consultant</i>	Sarner Grundy Lighting Design Pte Ltd
<i>Acoustics Consultant</i>	Acvicon Acoustics
<i>Main Contractor</i>	Sato Kogyo Co Ltd
<i>Development</i>	9 storey 5 basement entertainment complex 5.6 metre floor to floor heights with 4th storey height of 8.4 metre Basement 1-4th storey: Retail/ Food Amusement 5-7th : Cinema 8-9th : Clubs Glass curtain wall and aluminium panel cladding
<i>Site Area</i>	4,860 square metres
<i>Gross Floor Area</i>	24,676 square metres
<i>Plot Ratio</i>	5.077